

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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Here, literally, is escape literature. I, personally, am physically equipped to crawl through tunnels, to squeeze through crevices, and to run with alacrity. The fly in this particular ointment is that I just do not care to do any of these things.

Oberst Neitzel, Commandant of Stalag Luft XII, watched the face of Major James McClellan. "I am afraid that I have bad news for you, Major. Your entire project, your Operation Arnold, is known to me."

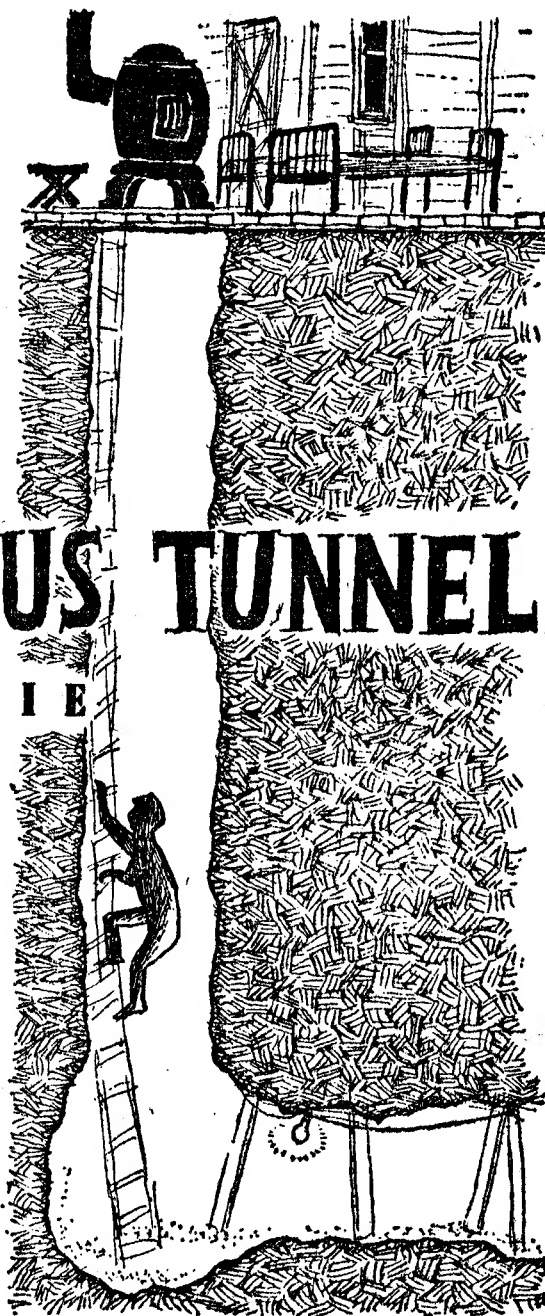
McClellan's jet-black eyes flickered for a moment. "Our project, Colonel? I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Neitzel smiled. "Your tunnel, Major. Your magnificent tunnel. I

THE FABULOUS TUNNEL

by JACK RITCHIE

know all about it." He laughed softly and moved to the stove which burned cherry-red in one corner of the small room in Prisoner Barracks 12-A. "Directly under this. Here your tunnel begins." He nodded approvingly. "Ingenuous. The stove continues burning, but it and the platform upon which it stands may still be swung out on a pivot. The shaft to the tunnel is exposed and the diggers go down. Then the stove is pushed back



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over the hole and no one is the wiser while the work continues."

He faced McClellan. "This is the second tunnel you have constructed and the second I have found. The other was four months ago, was it not?"

McClellan took a deep puff of his cigarette. "All right. You found this one too."

The Colonel nodded. "And this one also has gone beneath the two wire fences and into the woods beyond. You had but an hour or two more of digging and you would have been able to make your escape tonight. You and also as many others as may have wished to make the attempt." He clicked his tongue. "It is a pity, Major. Indeed a pity. So near and yet so far."

He studied McClellan. "But you may all consider yourselves fortunate that I stopped you at this stage. I made the misfortune of allowing you to actually complete your first tunnel."

McClellan smiled grimly. "And you and a platoon of guards were waiting for us when we came out."

Neitzel shook his head sadly. "I had sincerely intended no bloodshed. There would have been none except that two of your lieutenants

were foolish enough to attempt to run when the situation was hopeless. They should have put up their hands and submitted the way the rest of you did. Surely, you cannot blame me for their deaths?"

"No," McClellan said. "You're not the one we blame."

Neitzel returned to the present. "This Operation Arnold, as you call the tunnel, was extremely well organized."

"How did you know we called it Operation Arnold?" McClellan asked dryly.

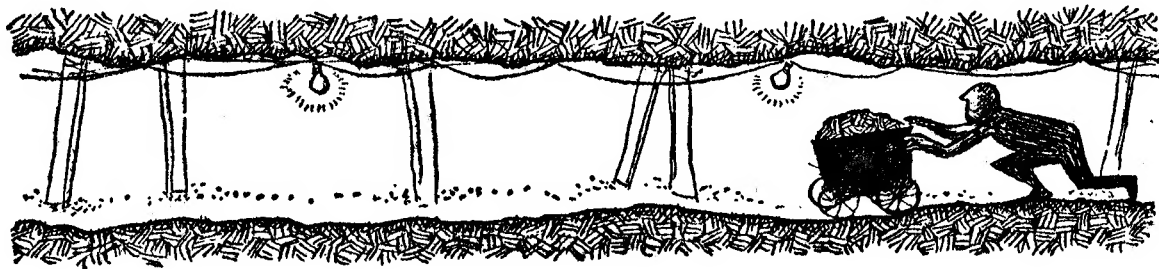
Neitzel hesitated a moment and then frowned. "When the discovery of your tunnel occurs a second time surely you cannot still be so stupid as not to suspect?"

McClellan smiled faintly. "We suspect."

Neitzel seemed satisfied. "Yes. There is one among you who has kept me well informed of all your activities."

McClellan's voice was soft. "I suppose it won't do me any good to ask you who it is?"

Neitzel laughed. "But of course I cannot tell you. When you do not know which one of the 2,000 men in this camp you cannot trust, this is valuable to me. I do not think



you will be digging any more of those magnificent tunnels that require the cooperation of hundreds of men and make possible mass escapes. Of course I am aware that you will continue individual attempts at escape, but these are relatively simple to cope with."

Neitzel clasped his hands behind his back. "Yes, my friend, a well-organized attempt. Captain Grady, for instance, commanded those who prepared the papers, the *Ausweis*, the *Urlaubschein*, the passes and the civilian clothing you would need after you left the tunnel." The Colonel gently rubbed his jaw with his swagger stick. "There were fifty-six complete sets of these papers, were there not?"

There was a light tap on the door and a fair-haired young American captain entered.

"Ah," Neitzel said. "Captain Baumann. And you had charge of tunnel security. It was your job to insure secrecy, to organize the warning system."

Baumann's eyes darted to McClellan.

"He knows about Arnold," McClellan said quietly.

Neitzel surveyed Baumann with curiosity. "Baumann? A good German name, is it not?"

"Yes, sir," Baumann said stiffly. "A good German name."

"I understand that you were born in Germany."

"Yes, sir. I was taken to America

when I was twelve and a half."

"You are now an American citizen?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the Americans have sent you to bomb your birthplace? Does this not cause some harm to your conscience? Eh?"

Baumann said nothing.

Neitzel turned to McClellan. "I know the English language well, Major, but still not with the assurance of those born into it. Does Captain Baumann speak with an accent?"

"You'd hardly notice it."

The Colonel stared at Baumann for a few moments, then shrugged and directed his attention back to the stove. "Your shaft goes thirty feet down and from there the tunnel actually begins. You wish to dig very deep so that it cannot be detected by the probing iron rods of my guards."

"This tunnel is now 367 feet long. It has gone under the last obstacle and you have but a few feet more to dig. You have planned to make your escape tonight. Fifty-six of you would be equipped with complete sets of papers, and as many others of you as wished would take their risks without them."

The *Oberst* paused. "You see, I know everything. You have a magnificent tunnel which makes the first one look primitive. You have made a ventilating system to provide fresh air to the diggers. This

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half." a citi- sent Does your you have done by joining thousands of tins which once contained condensed milk. You have a bellows to pump fresh air. And you have even made a little cart which runs on wooden rails to carry the dirt from one end of the tunnel back to the shaft."

Neitzel chuckled. "You have even strung a line of electric lights to provide illumination."

They heard whistles blowing outside and the Colonel glanced at his watch. "*Appell*. The morning counting formation." He smiled. "I will take this opportunity to address the men of your barracks."

Outside Neitzel waited patiently while the American prisoners straggled out into the April chill and fell slowly into formation before their barracks.

Stalag Luft XII consisted of a compound four hundred yards square. It was surrounded by two nine foot high fences and between them lay thick coils of rusting barbed wire. The elevated "goon" boxes stood every 150 yards along the perimeter, with an armed guard in each of them.

Inside the enclosure were twenty-two long wooden huts. Each building contained eighteen rooms, fifteen feet square, quartering eight men. There were also three smaller rooms, each for two men, reserved for higher ranking officers.

Neitzel fitted a cigarette into his holder and listened while *Unter-offizier* Weiss called the roll.

It was much like any other morning *Appell* except that this time Neitzel had ordered that none of the formations be dismissed until he had finished his business with barracks 12-A.

When Weiss was finished, he saluted his Colonel, stepped aside.

Neitzel's eyes went over the formation. All these officers had been shot down over Germany. Some were recent arrivals and others, whose uniforms were in various stages of disintegration, had been here as long as two years.

The *Oberst's* voice carried in the cool clear air. "I must admire you gentlemen for your resourcefulness, your organization." He savored the next words. "Your engineering."

The one hundred and fifty prisoners before him were silent and Neitzel could hear the roll still being called in front of some of the other barracks.

He put his hands behind his back and rocked slightly on his heels. "Gentlemen, I am afraid that, as you say, 'the jig is up.' I know all about your tunnel."

Neitzel watched them eagerly for a reaction and he was rewarded. At first there was only mumbling as the men glanced at each other, then the soft curses swelled into bitter growls.

Neitzel held up his hand and waited for silence. "I have known about this tunnel from the time it was begun."

Oberst Neitzel nodded amiably. "Yes, I have known about your magnificent tunnel the moment you began to work on it, and now that you have but a few feet to go to freedom, I must regretfully call a halt. I have enjoyed this game and no one has known of this tunnel but you and I, gentlemen. I did not tell my guards and they still know nothing about it. Nothing at all. Even now.

"I have even been—how do you say—'rooting' for you. I am displeased for the inefficiency of my guards and yet I am happy that they have never discovered what you have been doing."

The Oberst's eyes went from face to face. "You gentlemen had almost insurmountable difficulties. The soil you chose to dig in is sandy and therefore it was required that you shore up your tunnel. I know that you went throughout the compound selecting wooden bed slats—a few from each man—for this job." Neitzel laughed good-naturedly. "It was uncomfortable sleeping, was it not?"

"I have enjoyed your industry, your intelligence system. I know that you have men stationed at strategic points all over the camp. I am aware that whenever any of my men approach, the signal is given. Immediately work on the tunnel stops, the men ascend, the stove is replaced and you even quickly re-apply cement and dirt to cover any possible cracks that

might reveal the entrance to your project. I believe you do this in less than one minute. Excellent!"

He pointed his swagger stick. "You, Major Thomas, you had charge of the penguins."

Major Thomas, a burly man in the rear rank, shifted uneasily.

"Ah, yes," Neitzel said. "I know what the penguins are. One of your problems was the disposal of the sand which you took out of your tunnel. It is light-colored, not like that on the surface. It must be dispersed carefully or it would be noticed and the guards would know that you have been digging. And so you disposed of some of it in the soil of the camp garden and some under the floor of the camp theater. But that was not sufficient. There was still too much sand to conceal. And you could not scatter it about during the night, for then you are confined to your barracks.

"And so you used penguins. These men had a long sack concealed in each of their trouser legs. These sacks were filled with sand from the tunnel."

The Colonel smiled. "You Americans play many sports and you have many spectators. And so, in the midst of the spectators, each penguin pulls a string that controls the bottom of the bag and the sand falls to the ground. Then there is much shuffling of feet as the spectators move about and the sand is so thoroughly mixed with the surface ground that it cannot be detected."

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Neitzel walked along the front rank and stopped in front of a small-boned man with brown hair. "And here we have Lieutenant Hines. A little cog in the machine, but so important to all. You were what is called the Duty Pilot, Lieutenant Hines. Every morning after *appell* you were sent to your post at the gate with your little notebook. It was your work to make note of everyone who entered the compound; to put down when they came in and when they went out. This was to prevent any guard from concealing himself within the camp at night to spy upon you when you thought you were alone. Did you enjoy the fresh air, Lieutenant Hines? Did this simple duty leave you time to think?"

Hines licked his lips and said nothing.

Neitzel pointed the swagger stick again. "And now we come to the peak of this pyramid of organization. We come to the elite. The diggers themselves. The only ones who actually entered the tunnel. There were twelve of you, were there not, Lieutenant Malewski? And you worked in shifts of four?"

Malewski seemed slightly embarrassed at the attention he was receiving.

Neitzel strode back to a position fifteen feet in front of the formation. "Do you think that I have been a cruel man? To let you dig and hope for these three months?"

He shook his head. "No. I was not cruel. I know that you have your glee clubs, your games, your theater groups, but I also know that these cannot keep one really occupied. One must have something important, a larger goal. One needs something to command one's thoughts, one's energies. And so I have let this keep you busy. You had something important to live for, something to help you forget the long hours here.

"And now the penalties, gentlemen. They are the usual and you are lucky. We obey the Geneva Convention, and so you will receive two weeks in solitary confinement. The 'cooler,' as you call it."

His teeth showed slightly. "Of course I cannot put all of you in at once. We do not have enough room. You will have to take your turns."

Neitzel fitted another cigarette into his holder. "Yes, gentlemen, you are lucky. But do you remember *Obergefreiter* Butenhoff? The little private whom you succeeded in bribing when you were making your first tunnel? He brought you little useful things from the outside. And you remember what happened to him?"

The Colonel nodded. "Yes. I had him shot. It was unfortunate for little Butenhoff, but it would also have been unfortunate for me if you had completed your escape." He laughed without humor. "In that case, I would probably have

been shot too. We Germans have harsh, swift justice. We tolerate no mistakes."

He dismissed the unpleasant thought. "And now I am sure that you are curious how I knew about your tunnel from the beginning. Do I read minds? Do I have a new machine for detecting tunnels? Do I have concealed microphones in your barracks?" He shook his head. "I think that by this time even the most unintelligent of you have reached a conclusion."

He put out his arm and then slowly closed the fingers into a tight fist. "Yes. I have one of you in my hand."

There was a growl of curses from the prisoners and Neitzel waited for it to subside. "Did you not suspect when your first tunnel failed? When we were waiting for you?"

His eyes fixed on McClellan. "You Americans are so trusting. You do not realize, or will not, that among you there are many types of men. Some are vicious, or weak, or ill, or have their secret motives. One must never trust everyone. We Germans do not. We know that there are traitors and weaklings everywhere."

He paused, and for awhile there was no sound but the wind over the pines surrounding the compound. "This traitor among you. Is he a weakling? Can he not endure the empty belly, but needs secret

food more than prison rations? Is he a child who must have his cigarettes? His candy? Or does he do this because of a great conviction that we are right?"

The Colonel laughed. "That is what he says. He does these things because he believes in us. But, gentlemen, I think myself that he is a weakling and I despise him fully as much as you do. But I can use him."

Neitzel rubbed his hands. "And now, Major McClellan, I wish that you would join *Unteroffizier* Weiss and me while we . . . ah . . . dedicate this tunnel of yours."

Inside the barracks, Neitzel warmed himself at the stove for a moment and then stepped away. "Proceed, Weiss. It is under this stove."

Unteroffizier Weiss crouched on his knees and with a pen knife chipped at the cement seam around the tile platform.

"Major McClellan," Neitzel said, "I was not quite accurate when I said that no one knew of your tunnel until today. Last night I informed my superiors in Berlin that I had discovered it and foiled your plot to escape."

McClellan smiled faintly.

The Colonel was pleased with himself. "I described your tunnel in detail and they were delighted at my vigilance. I was told to expect high officials this afternoon. The very highest." He glanced at his watch. "In one half an hour, they will arrive." He was thoughtful.

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The cement came away easily. Then Weiss carefully swung the still-glowing stove on its pivot.

The Colonel peered down the dark thirty-foot shaft. "Where is the switch for the lights, Major?"

"Between the first two rungs of the ladder."

The colonel nodded. "Weiss, you have the honor of being the first German to see this tunnel. You will descend and at the base of the shaft you will find three side chambers. One contains the air pump, one is the assembling place for the shoring frames, and the other is where the sand is stored until it can be passed up to the penguins to dispose of it. You will push yourself on the little cart to the end of the tunnel and then you will report what you have seen back to me."

Weiss did not look at all happy, but he snapped to momentary attention. "Yes, sir." He cast an apprehensive eye down the hole and then slowly lowered himself down the rungs nailed to one side of the shaft. He found the light switch and flicked it on. A dim light appeared at the base of the shaft.

Neitzel smiled. "And so, Major McClellan, it is all over. Three months of hard work." He studied McClellan. "Tell me, if you knew the name of this traitor, what would you do to him? Kill him? How do you say, 'lynch' him?"

"No. He would be tried by a military court after the war."

Neitzel exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke. "This name you chose for the tunnel, Operation Arnold. Does it have any significance?"

"We named it in honor of Benedict Arnold," McClellan said dryly.

They heard Weiss climbing back up the shaft and Neitzel frowned. "He cannot be back so soon."

Weiss's head and shoulders appeared out of the shaft and his face bore a look of wide-eyed surprise. "*Herr Oberst!* There is no tunnel!"

The Colonel glared. "What is this? What do you say?"

"There is just the shaft thirty feet down, *Herr Oberst*. There are no chambers and there is no tunnel."

Neitzel turned and stared unbelievably at McClellan. After fifteen seconds, he spoke. "This is a . . . a hoax?"

McClellan folded his arms. "You could call it that."

The Colonel seemed dazed. "You went through all this as a joke. An elaborate joke to fool me?"

McClellan said nothing.

Neitzel's face whitened. "Do you realize what you have done? I have informed my superiors that there will be a tunnel and they will be here in a short time. Do you know what will happen to me? I will be removed from my command and . . ." Neitzel had difficulty speaking the next words. "If the visitor I expect comes here and is disappointed, I will most certainly be shot."

McClellan nodded slowly "It looks like that from here."

Neitzel was shocked. "Do you hate me so much? Have I not been a fair and just commander of this compound?"

"You did your job," McClellan said. "We can't complain."

Neitzel waved a hand helplessly. "Then why have you done this to me?"

McClellan lit a cigarette and blew out the match. "Suppose, Colonel Neitzel, that when your visitor arrives, you present him with a tunnel."

"There is no tunnel!"

McClellan smiled thinly. "But there is, Colonel. And it is just the kind of tunnel your visitor expects. All the modern conveniences."

Neitzel's eyes were still perplexed.

"It's not down that shaft," McClellan said. "The real tunnel is somewhere else in the compound. Only I, the diggers, and the occupants of the room in which it begins, know where it is. I chose them because I knew I could trust them implicitly. I couldn't be sure of anyone else. All the hundreds of others who helped us and the rest of the men in the compound were told that it began here."

Neitzel shook his head. "But surely the penguins would have known!"

"No. We brought the dirt to this barracks and the penguins picked it up here. They thought it came

from the shaft under the stove."

Neitzel took a breath of determination. "I will call out the guards. We will find this tunnel!"

McClellan watched his cigarette smoke ascend to the ceiling. "In less than a half an hour, Colonel? When they haven't been able to find it in three months?"

Neitzel rubbed the back of his neck. "But you will present me with this tunnel? For a price?"

"For a price," McClellan said evenly. "The name of the traitor."

Neitzel studied him searchingly. "You have dug this tunnel, you have used this deceit, just for the purpose of forcing me to reveal your traitor?"

"No. Until a week ago we were going to use the tunnel to escape."

"Ah, but you changed your minds?"

"The war is almost over. A matter of a month or two. We all know that and we decided that if the opportunity presented itself we would sacrifice the tunnel to learn the name of the traitor."

Neitzel sighed. "And the opportunity presented itself." After a few moments he smiled faintly. "Yes, the war is almost over. It is lost and I have the understandable human wish to survive it. It would be deplorable for me to be shot during its closing moments."

In November of the same year, Colonel Neitzel and Major Mc-

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Clellan stepped out of the Bavarian country house where an American court-martial had just convicted Lieutenant Hines, former prisoner of war at Stalag Luft XII, of treason.

Neitzel smiled. "Now that the war has ended, things have changed, eh, Major? Now I go back to the compound and you are free to spend an enjoyable evening in one of our towns."

McClellan offered him an American cigarette. "You'll be out in a couple of weeks. We just wanted

you to be available for the trial."

Neitzel accepted a light. "It is amazing, is it not?"

"What is?"

"Of these 2,000 men, only one was a traitor.

McClellan smiled faintly. "It's the way we live, Colonel."

Neitzel watched the season's first snow drifting down. "We Germans shall have to try it too, Major." He put up the collar of his greatcoat and walked to the snow-covered jeep, waiting to drive him back to the compound.



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